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# Animating 'The Blank Page': Exhibitions as Feminist Community Adult Education

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**Abstract:** Public museums and art galleries in Canada are highly authoritative, and trusted knowledge and identity mobilising institutions, whose exhibitions are frequently a 'blank page' of erasure, silencing, and marginalisation, in terms of women's histories, experiences, and contributions. Feminist exhibitions are a response to this, but few in Canada have been explored as practices of feminist community adult education. I begin to address this gap with an analysis of two feminist exhibitions: *In Defiance: Indigenous Women Define Themselves*, curated by Mohawk-Iroquois artist, Lindsay Katsitsakatste Delaronde, at the Legacy Gallery, University of Victoria; and *Fashion Victims: The Pleasures & Perils of Dress in the 19th Century*, curated by Ryerson Professor Alison Matthews David, at the Bata Shoe Museum, Toronto. Although dissimilar in form, focus, and era, these exhibitions act as powerful intentional pedagogical processes of disruption and reclamation, using images and storytelling to animate, re-write and reimagine the 'blank pages' of particular and particularised histories and identities. Through the centrality of women's bodies and practices of violence, victimization, and women's power, these exhibitions encourage the feminist oppositional imagination, dialogic looking, gender consciousness, and a visual literacy of hope and possibility. Yet, as women's stories become audible through the very representational vehicles and institutional spaces used to silence them, challenges remain.

**Keywords:** museums and art galleries; exhibitions; feminist community adult education; visual literacy; oppositional imagination

## 1. Introduction

"Where the storyteller is loyal, eternally and unswervingly (. . .) to the story, there, in the end, silence will speak. Where the story has been betrayed, silence is but emptiness." (Dinesen 1991, p. 100)

In 1955 Danish writer, Isak Dinesen, published a short story entitled *The Blank Page* that serves as a metaphor for my explorations of two museum and art gallery exhibitions as feminist community adult education. Narrated by an elderly woman storyteller, Dinesen's narrative focusses on an exhibition in the long gallery of the Convent Velho for sisters of the Catholic Carmelite Order in Portugal. Along one wall hangs a series of gilt framed canvases each inscribed with a woman's name and a story which 'despite the great secrecy', is placed there to pass on what Macedo (2015) characterises as 'evidence of her own particularity' (p. 89). 'But in the midst of the long row there hangs a canvas which differs from the others', the narrator tells us, because this one 'is a blank page' (Dinesen 1991, p. 104). The storyteller queries 'Who then tells a finer tale than any of us?' Her response, 'silence does.' She asks as well where one might 'read a deeper tale? Upon the blank page', she replies (p. 100). For it is before this blank page that story-tellers 'draw their veils and are dumb', elderly princesses of Portugal, 'worldly wise, dutiful, long-suffering queens, wives and mothers' stand still, and the 'old and young nuns (. . .) sink into deepest thought' (p. 100).

In her reflections on *The Blank Page*, feminist cultural theorist Macedo (2015) asks us to ponder 'this disquieting narrative about the erasure of identity and silence', and its powerful commentary on the unmaking 'and making of history/herstory' (p. 83). My own reflections take me to museum and art gallery exhibitions that have for centuries worked as mediums of 'the blank page', vehicles to stereotype, objectivise, trivialise or silence women at 'the less discernible outer rims' of the world's canvas (Bergsdóttir 2016, p. 128). More recently, however, feminists have begun to curate diverse types of exhibitions to revise and trouble this politics of mis-representation, parody and obliteration and animate change (e.g., Bartlett 2016; Best 2016; Cramer and Witcomb 2018; Fletcher 2008). This constitutes what adult educator Belenky et al. (1997, p. 4) called 'the roar which lies on the other side of silence' yet there are relatively few studies of feminist exhibitions and none to date have explored them as feminist community adult education.

I begin to address this gap by focusing on two such exhibitions in Canada. The first is *In Defiance: Indigenous Women Define Themselves*, curated by Mohawk-Iroquois artist Lindsay Katsitsakatste Delaronde at the Legacy Gallery, University of Victoria. The second is *Fashion Victims: The Pleasures & Perils of Dress in the 19th Century*, curated by Ryerson Professor Alison Matthews David and the Bata Shoe Museum, Toronto. Although dissimilar in form, focus and era, these exhibitions act as powerful intentional pedagogical processes of disruption and reclamation, using images and storytelling to animate, re-write and reimagine the 'blank pages' of particular and particularised histories and identities. Through the centrality of women's bodies and practices of violence and victimisation, these exhibitions encourage the feminist oppositional imagination, dialogic looking, gender consciousness and hope. Yet mindful of the power of 'the blank page', I also acknowledge how, as women's stories become audible through the very representational vehicles and institutional spaces used to silence them, challenges remain, reminding us feminist exhibiting as community pedagogy is still what Macedo (2015) calls 'a poiesis to come' (p. 95).

## 2. Exhibitions, Representation, Knowledge and Identity

In this section of my article, I summarise some significant ideas around exhibitions in order to establish their knowledge creating, educational potential. As I do so, I am reminded that historically, public museums and art galleries have received negligible attention from adult educators despite the fact that they are active and influential sites of community or public education and learning (e.g., Clover et al. 2015). Moreover, hundreds of these institutions-large and small-dot the national landscape and are visited daily by as many adults who come for leisure or escape but most frequently to learn about the world, other people and themselves (e.g., Gordon-Walker 2018; Marstine 2006).

Museums and art galleries educate the public through workshops, tours and seminars but their primary pedagogical medium is the exhibition. Hale (2012) describes exhibitions as 'narrative environments', storytellers of society, culture, arts, history and people (p. ix). For Bartlett (2016), they 'mark the significance of their subject, lending authority and a certain amount of cultural value' (p. 307). In doing so, they perform as structures of constructive intent, educational 'plays of force' designed unambiguously authoritatively 'to influence the public' (Steeds 2014, p. 29). Exhibitions do not simply disseminate knowledge, they actively construct it. Inseparable to the process of knowledge construction is 'the practice of representation', combinations of images, objects, and explanatory texts all carefully choreographed into exhibitions to shape, produce and mobilise our understandings of reality (Bergsdóttir 2016; Hall et al. 2013; Whitehead 2009). Unquestioned in museum and art gallery constructions of reality today is their ability to fix identity-who we were, who we are, and who we should be (Cramer and Witcomb 2018, p. 2; Hall et al. 2013; Marstine 2006). These practices of knowledge, reality and identity making are highly significant when we consider not only how many adults visit but also, how well these institutions have socialised us to believe that what they show and tell us is authentic to reality and factual. Through a semantics of cultural authority, a disciplinary power 'whose legitimacy brooks no challenge' they have earned themselves a reputation as the most trusted

knowledge-legitimizing institutions in society today (Whitehead 2009, p. 31; see also Gordon-Walker 2018; Hooper-Greenhill 1992).

For feminist cultural theorists Carson and Pajaczkowska (2001), the power of exhibition representations lies in 'the seen'. As the most commanding of our senses, "what we see is considered evidence, truth and factual' (p. 1), in other words, sight can act pedagogically. Moreover, as sight establishes particular understandings of reality it is honed through the context 'in which a visual is considered' (p. 1). In other words, what we see, and the setting of that seeing, such as the authoritative trusted context of a museum or art gallery, together play a constitutive role in forging what we see and know to be reality (Bergsdóttir 2016). Although Porter (1991) rightly challenges the image of the adult visitor as simply 'a passive recipient of [its'] authoritarian discourse' (p. 105), scholars, such as Mirzoeff (2013), Hall et al. (2013), Whitehead (2009) and Cramer and Witcomb (2018) point to the power of exhibition 'visualising technologies', coupled with museum disciplinary power, to encourage visitors to 'see what they are being taught to see' (Cramer and Witcomb 2018, p. 2). What is being argued here is that like community adult education, exhibitions are never impartial, objective windows onto the world. They interpret and teach the world. They display it in very particular ways' (p. 8) and all too often, feminist cultural theorists argue, the way has been through the masculine view'. Exhibition narratives are too often steeped in gender inequity, in patriarchal hegemonic discourses and visualisations that place men at the centre and women as peripheral entities or stereotypes of femininity. (Bergsdóttir 2016; Fletcher 2008; Porter 1991; Pollock 2003). Pervasive practices, such as these of silencing, excluding, misrepresenting, and stereotyping are problematic because they diminish 'women's own vision of their subjectivity' (Macedo 2015, p. 90). Repetitively visualised and storied as lesser to men and their heroic accomplishments, women envisage themselves as non-actors and non-contributors to history, society and culture, and as mere objects of the masculine gaze. In other words, as 'the blank page upon which the word is written' (p. 90).

### 3. Feminism and Community Adult Education

Making the invisibility of women's oppression and erasure visible, and enabling a sense of power and agency are central to all feminist agendas for change.

Central to feminist exhibitions is the visible and storied showcasing women's lives, histories and experiences in ways that counter how they have been written out of or 'into history according to masculine perceptions of significance' (Cramer and Witcomb 2018, p. 5). Haraway (1991) calls this taking back the power of vision, visibility and visualisations. She believes that women have tended to undervalue both the seen, and the placing of themselves into the public limelight. As Dinesen's poignant tale of *The Blank Page* suggests, 'We know the story of the blank page. However, we are somewhat averse to telling it' (Dinesen 1991, p. 102). Feminist exhibitions work to re-write 'the blank page of the centuries-old untold, silenced stories' (Macedo 2015, p. 86) in ways that catch the public eye. For Marshment (1993) it is imperative that women (re)represent themselves in all their diversity, and pull 'into the foreground that which has been side-lined, repressed and discarded' (Barr 2016, p. 27).

Scholars writing about contemporary feminist exhibitions provide important points of analysis that are in fact central tenants of feminist community adult education. For example, coming from different angles Bartlett (2016), Best (2016) and Fletcher (2008) outline what it means for an exhibition to be feminist. To be feminist an exhibition must be an activist and praxis-orientated vehicle that gives women's stories centre stage. It must situate women contextually, that is within historical moments that have shaped their lives (Best 2016). Whilst celebration of women's accomplishments and acts of remembrance are important, feminist exhibitions will address structural inequalities, as these are what most impede the process of gender justice and change. It is therefore not a matter of having a woman's exhibition or even including women within the framework of normative exhibition spaces. Rather, it requires a shift in perspective, and a new understanding of the nature of the world being represented through women's stories and lives in exhibition (Cramer and Witcomb 2018, p. 4). In feminist community adult education terms, we call this designing intentional, 'political learning

agendas for individual and social transformation' (English and Irving 2015, p. 3). This agenda centres on developing gender consciousness by illuminating how patriarchal power operates in, and works to shape the lives of women. For Manicom and Walters (2012), this means being able to see that power and through this seeing, begin to question the status quo narratives of gender, as well as race and class. Women must also be provided the opportunities to advance their own authority of authorship over their own stories and lives (e.g., Clover et al. 2015; Manicom and Walters 2012). Taking this further are calls for greater visual literacy. Visual literacy comes from using art and visuals to teach us something 'about' the world. In feminist terms, this is teaching us visually 'about' women and their blank pages in history, as well as about gender and other forms of linked injustice and inequality. Visual literacy is also engaging in art-making practices that encourage learning to take an active part in the world (e.g., Pennisi 2008). Feminists have used practices, such as mask-making, photography, fashion shows, storytelling, and a variety of other creative and aesthetic processes to engage bodies and the affective (embodied learning) as well as for political teaching and learning in community (Butterwick and Roy 2016; Manicom and Walters 2012). Furthermore, as a dialogic form of engagement the visual can encourage not only conversation, but also, active 'listening', a capacity that allows us to see, hear and learn across difference (Butterwick and Roy 2016). If we want to move beyond exhibition narratives of the world that have in Canada have been all too often constructed by men, we need what Wilson MacKay and Monteverde (2003, p. 41) call 'dialogic looking', that form of engagement between viewers and representations, images, objects and other sensory stimuli that make up the types of important 'conversations' we continue to need to have (Gordon-Walker 2018). Finally, visual literacy is a means to fuel the imagination, that which Green (1995) argues, makes "empathy possible. It is what enables us to cross the empty spaces [and] permits us to give credence to alternative realities. It allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions" (p. 3). For Manicom and Walters (2012) the pedagogical imagination is 'that which might become thinkable and actionable when prevailing relations of power are made visible, when understandings shake loose from normative perspectives and generate new knowledge and possibilities' (p. 4). Feminist creative expressions and practices are rooted in observation, discovery, but equally in the visual.

#### 4. Animating the 'Blank Page'

I turn now to the two exhibitions curated in Victoria and Toronto: *In Defiance* and *Fashion Victims* respectively. Using observations, drawing from labels, artist statements and press coverage, I describe briefly the context-situatedness—content and strategies of each. Questions used for analysis include: How are these exhibitions 'political', 'intentional', and 'critical'? What are their creative and imaginative elements? How do they take up social and structural power? How do they emancipate visitors from the patriarchal and colonised perspectives previously associated with their subjects? How do they enable seeing and listening across difference? How do they re-imagine and re-write historical omissions, misrepresentations and other injustices and make links to the contemporary? Minding the 'blank page' and the pragmatic realities to pedagogies of possibility, I also query the limitations challenges to exhibiting women's stories within patriarchal socio-cultural and institutional contexts.

##### 4.1. *In Defiance: Indigenous Women Define Themselves*

"When we [Indigenous women] are looking at being sexual, the repercussions of that have been fatal." (Delaronde, Artist statement)

*In Defiance: Indigenous Women Define Themselves* was a powerful self-portraiture photography exhibition guest curated by Iroquois-Mohawk Lindsay Katsitsakatste Delaronde at the Legacy Gallery in autumn 2016. Owned by the University of Victoria, the gallery is located in central Victoria and is free and open to the public. *In Defiance* was a highly personal yet deeply political exhibition situated in a particular historical moment in Canada, a moment of unprecedented recognition of the fundamental impacts of colonialism on Indigenous peoples and specifically, on Indigenous women. In acknowledgement of this 'blank page' of Canadian history, a task force had been struck to investigate the literally hundreds

of disappearances and murders of Indigenous women that had been for decades all but ignored by the law enforcement agencies. For Delaronde this connection was clear: 'Violence against Indigenous women is a fact—it happened and it's happening . . . There are people who are part of this project that have family members who are missing, who are murdered, so this history is very alive and real in a lot of us' (in Madden 2016, p. 37). The eloquence with which the artists spoke in their own narratives about their participation in the project, continued to build this connection.

*In Defiance* is a series of 32 colour self-portraits of a group of Indigenous women, ages ranging from 22 to 56 years, who participated in a photography project to create their own self-identity. Each image is accompanied by a one-page written story about themselves. These photographs and narratives created intentionally for exhibition began with a participatory adult education process called *Project Squaw*. The 32 women were invited to stage a self-portrait based on the idea of 'natural sovereign powers of eroticism, sensuality and vulnerability' (Artist statement). In deciding how and where each woman would be portrayed, the project gave them 'a voice and a platform ( . . . ) of safety and trust to express the most private and sensual aspects of themselves' (Artist statement). This idea of creating safe space to explore issues or be oneself is central to feminist adult education as is the practice of empowerment, stated by Delaronde as giving 'full control each woman had over how they were represented, given that the project deals with deeply personal responses to sexuality, female identity and the body' (in Madden 2016, p. 36). For her, 'the process was as important as the outcome' (Artist statement). The process the women participants underwent to speak their own truths in ways that challenged mainstream images of Indigenous women's identity and their links to sexuality. These normative constructions through and for the masculine gaze have stereotyped Indigenous women, and positioned them as objects, 'the other, of external sexual male desire, which has left them open to 'oppression, marginalization, exploitation and sexualization' (Artist statement). The outcome of the process was the artistry of the self-portraits themselves, and the exhibition as a whole, which challenged publicly 'how historic photographic portraits of Indigenous women ( . . . ) have established a pervasive romanticized and sometimes fetishized interpretation of their unidentified subjects that have been integrated into the foundations of society today' (Artist statement). This recognition of both process and outcome, or product, in this case the portraits and exhibition, speaks to the importance of art and/as public pedagogy. Clover et al. (2015) and Butterwick and Roy (2016) concur that one should not usurp the other. Rather, process and aesthetics in community adult education must work in concert as this is how arts-based practices have the strongest impact both within and beyond a single project. This conversation between product and process politicises art practice and the women involved by altering systems of participation, de-centring power, and/or binding the work to larger socio-political arenas.

Like the long gallery of the Convent Velho in Dinesen's story, the portraits line up along the walls of the Legacy Gallery. But now filling the 'blank page' (or better said blank pages) are images of an authoritative group of self-identity determining women in whose confrontational gazes 'no meanings need be inferred because each woman has already defined herself—she's telling you; she's showing you ( . . . ) who she is and who she is not' (p. 37). The Image is both meaning and identity, representation the 'real' experience and vision of their reality. Pedagogically speaking, this is the act of empowerment, a practice of visual literacy in which women engage in art-making, in this case, 'themselves' as works of art. In other words, they are not the objects of the masculine gaze but the aesthetic subjects of their own lives. Going further, *In Defiance* is an embodied learning project. To borrow from Macedo (2015, p. 90) 'the centrality of the body is the main *topos*' of this exhibition and the women's creativity. Many bodies sport multiple tattoos, and most of the women chose to fashion themselves partially clothed or entirely naked. It is through their bodies we see inter-linked practices of sexism, colonialism and white supremacy, as well as emancipation, resilience and the practice of decolonisation. Their bodies act as text, artefact and site where the women's images of themselves come to life in a sensual physicality. Their defiant attitudes as most face the camera head on, is also a vehicle through which they imagine themselves and imprint that identity on us. In their stares, self-fashioned bodies, positioning and

stories, we read a courageous vulnerability and a defiant re-valuing of women's bodies not as objects of consumption but as subjects of their own creativity. The natural settings in which so many of the women have photographed themselves also speaks of complexities. Firstly, it speaks to how the female body is connected to the land, a dichotomy of 'givers of life and receivers of violence directly related to the exploitation of the land' (Artistic statement). The stereotype of land is also taken up playfully as are other elements in the exhibition in ways that augment its critical messaging. For example, one of the women positioned herself on her knees, wearing nothing save a mask. Feminist adult educators Roy and Eales (2010) remind us masks elicit 'ambiguity and tentativeness' but they also offer 'deeper insights about the reality of the world' (p. 433), a reality of concealment behind patriarchal and colonial practices of misrecognition and a practice of heterogeneity that has denied Indigenous women difference and full agency in society. But masks are also powerful—they symbolise extraordinary beings, and relationships to others, including nature, which is extremely important in Indigenous cultures and in this exhibition. A poignant playfulness also comes out in the portrait of a woman who has positioned herself in a mud puddle. For me, it spoke to both the joy of youth and where Indigenous women are located on gender, social and cultural hierarchies.

#### 4.2. *Fashion Victims: The Pleasures and Perils of Dress in the 19th Century*

"By approaching fashion history through material history, *Fashion Victims* connects the fashions ( . . . ) with the risks." (Viridi-Dhesi 2015, p. 645)

It is autumn 2017 and the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto has an exhibition celebrating the House of Dior's 70th anniversary, one of many curated world-wide. Spanning the years 1947 to 1957 following WWII, this exhibition showcases 'Dior's "masterful", "revolutionary" *New Look* and how, through metres of cloth, full skirts, tiny corseted waists, stiletto heels, thin straps, soft shoulders, and padded hips, he 'swept away the masculine wartime styles' to make women 'feminine' again' (Media Release). However, against this grain of masculinity aggrandising and femininity romanticising is *Fashion Victims: The Pleasures and Perils of Dress in the 19th Century* curated by Alison Matthews David at the Bata Shoe Museum, but three blocks away.

*Fashion victims* is an ironical, critical and intentional visitation to a 'blank page' of fashion history. Enconced in a gallery in the rafters of the 3rd floor of the museum, it performs as a satirical, disquieting, politico-social analysis of an industry that in fact has had, and continues to have, major implications for women's (and some men's) bodies and identities. Similar to *In Defiance*, women's bodies are the text, the artefact and the lens that give us a look into how what women wore worked often simultaneously shape both femininity, injury and death. In this exhibition, we are invited to see and to feel unambiguously the long-time connection between pain, mortality and beauty inflicted on women (and some men) and in the past, although the artist statement reminds us, 'the truth is that women have been suffering for style, since well before the corset days' and the influence fashion wields over women's minds and bodies remains just as high today. Conversely, we learn that the term 'fashion victim' was in fact very much in use in the 19th century and 'being slaves to fashion', is also not a new expression. Curatorial statements and labels noted that when we use expressions, such as these, 'we tend to think of someone who has gone to crazy extremes in their wardrobe. But the way it was used the 19th century, at the time of the Industrial Revolution, was literally, that one was in danger of risking their health by following the latest fashion trends.'

To create the exhibition Matthews David drew from Victorian medical journals, back issues of *Punch* and the *London Times* and the Bata Shoe Museum's own shoe collection. Central to this exhibition is a focus on the most dangerous dresses, shoes and accessories of the Victorian era. Adeptly, the exhibition takes up the sartorial mores of the 19th century, raising questions of health and safety for the wearers and the makers of to fashion, and I return to this. While the process of creation was less participatory than *In Defiance*, it nonetheless intentionally highlights a very different narrative about the power and impact of fashion, positioning it as a gendered, structural issue of capitalism and

oppression as well as, manipulation and manufacturing of women's bodies and their perceived 'needs' in terms of fashion.

The exhibition functions pedagogically in a number of ways. For example, it is an embodied learning process. Through a colonnade of vitrines the viewer feels she is in a large and elegant 19th century department store, such as Selfridges. Once inside, however, the narrative is decisively different, focussing not on male designer heroism, progress or ingenuity as is most often the case, but on how the dyes and colours acted as poisons. For example, a particular mauve dye was developed using the plentiful yet toxic coal tar sludge in 1856. Fashion victims 'developed violent skin reactions dubbed the 'mauve measles' after wearing it head to toe.' We are told that although the medical industry fought back, incriminating everything from gloves to shoes, but the fashion dictates carried on for many years. To add authenticity to the narrative of the exhibition, we learn that David had one of the gowns tested at the Ryerson University labs and the dyes were still full of arsenic. Apparently, the corporation Farrow & Ball continues to offer 'a presumably poison-free' version of the same colours with many lipsticks today still containing lead.

This poisoning, the discomfort of constricting corsets and the impossibly narrow footwear women were expected to wear was matched only by the at times *fatal* implications of wearing highly flammable volumes of material. In one of the exhibition's acts of bringing stories from the past to life, we learn that Oscar Wilde's sisters were waltzing one evening around the sitting room floor and as one passed the open fire-place her crinoline caught fire. In the panic her sister's dress also caught fire and they both died from their burns.

*Fashion Victims* also illuminates other forms of social control through fashion and raises issues around 'sex' and eroticism that render visible the masculine gaze. 'A display of a "Louis Heel" of a pair of boudoir slippers reflected a highly erotic image of femininity' which worked to undermine the growing suffrage movement (Viridi-Dhesi 2015, p. 644). By reintroducing the 'gentile' high heel (which also limited mobility), shoes highlighted the masculinity of the women marching in the streets to destabilise entrenched gender positions. As noted above, the exhibition also included an assortment of magazines (*Punch* and the *London Times*) with a variety of articles, cartoons and other abusive, debasing and ridiculing caricatures of women. Whilst capitalism, consumerism and patriarchy avoided critique, the women were trivialised and lambasted for *their* ill-conceived fashion choices, and excessive vanity.

Because the exhibition is set in the time of the Industrial Revolution, the category of woman is shot through with class. In a particularly poignant image, a socialite is linked to her personal maid in death from the handling and wearing of toxic gowns. Their entwined skeletal remains suggest the murderous practice of fashion paid no heed to class. Yet, the exhibition also makes class distinctions visible. One installation entitled "A stitch in time" from 1868 read: '[E]mbroidery pays poorly—one could not make a living at it now unless they had constant work, and were rapid with a needle.' As a community pedagogical device, images and stories also rendered visible the additional impact of low pay, long working hours, and lack of decent lighting which affect workers eyesight and thus threaten their employment and lives. While we may believe this to be something in the past, it continues today in the world's sweatshops that make-up the capitalist fashion industry.

## 5. Divergences and Challenges

Manicom and Walters (2012) remind us that any feminist pedagogy of possibility, any form of community adult education, must be tempered with pragmatism, the recognition of what is feasible to change, and what is not through adult education and within existing patriarchal and institutional power parameters.

Exhibitions, such as *In Defiance* and *Fashion Victims*, are not part of the permanent collection and permanence in art galleries and museums implies significance. Therefore, as temporary entities, claims to a high degree of emancipatory potential are diminished (e.g., Bartlett 2016). In other words, as itinerant one-off gestures feminist exhibitions are unlikely to make substantive contributions toward shifting structural or institutional inequalities. Yet, the same could be said of any form of community

adult education. Community projects, workshops and even university courses are always temporal but nonetheless worth doing because they will have an impact.

Building on the above, *In Defiance* encouraged many Indigenous women, men and young people in general to visit the Legacy, a free access site. The many school visitations to the Bata Shoe Museum's exhibition ensured young women and girls, who will be subject to historical forgetting and the gendered deception of fashion, were exposed to a different and poignant narrative. However, the Bata Shoe Museum is not free-entry, and this presents a financial barrier. Regardless of finances the fact remains that despite all art galleries and museums do to reach and encourage diverse audiences, they are still experienced as elitist and this prohibits exhibitions, such as *In Defiance* and *Fashion Victims*, from reaching their full, pedagogical potential (e.g., [Gordon-Walker 2018](#); [Marstine 2006](#)). Moreover, as most adult educators have historically ignored museums and art galleries as critical sites of knowledge creation (and rightly so given their hegemonic attitudes and practices), feminist exhibitions that could greatly augment social consciousness agendas will go untapped (e.g., [Clover et al. 2015](#), p. viii).

While the term 'squaw' was in the original title of the *In Defiance* exhibit, and it was peppered in texts throughout the exhibition, Legacy Gallery staff did not allow its usage in the exhibition title. In racist, colonial Canada this was probably wise, as it is a highly derogatory term, and could simply reinforce a stereotype. However, its erasure from the prominent position of exhibition title impeded somewhat the power of its irony as a rhetorical device. Irony not only provides comic relief it offers an indirect pointing toward deeper understanding while allowing that understanding to reveal itself to an audience in a more personal and subjective fashion. Irony is very useful when it is used pedagogical as feminist political praxis, as Delaronde had intended.

Staying with the issue of language there is a striking contrast in the exhibition titles. *In Defiance* is clearly a disruption, a voice of women and a speaking back to power. As language is powerful, 'defiance' is a commanding against the grain of the normative adjectives used to position Indigenous women, which made ignoring hundreds of their murders and disappearances possible. Women illustrating personal and collective strength and authorship confers a sense not only of their agency, but instils hope for the creative dissent and change that is taking place today despite the constraints of sexism and colonialism. *Fashion Victims* clearly centres on victimisation, on how women's (and some men's) bodies were manipulated and fashioned to fit, or better said create, particular visions of femininity and control women's social functioning. Moving away from images of women as mere victims is imperative, fashion is normatively taken up in museums uncritically, a series of heroic narratives of male designers or frivolity that belies its destructive power. This contrary stance is therefore, a refreshingly diabolical turning of the *New Look*, if I may, on its head.

Taking this further, neither exhibition used the terms feminist or feminism in their titles, although for maximum political impact, some feminist cultural theorists argue its necessity (e.g., [Bartlett 2016](#)). While I am not convinced this is the case given what I saw and felt, it is important to query whenever we avoid the term, if we fall prey to anti-feminist rhetoric that has at best, hallmarked a feminist 'as man-hater and apocryphal bra-burner'? ([Arnold 2001](#), p. 208). Moreover, by avoiding the term do we inadvertently contribute to the problematic belief that the problem is not "patriarchy" but "feminism" and miss an important opportunity of discussion? (e.g., [Bates 2018](#)).

Building on this, although there was a clear 'feminist orientation' to *Fashion Victims*, various statements and positionings suggested fashion was equally perilous for men. Prominent examples were the "Mad Hatter" of toxic mercury which affected the health of male workers, and the discomfort for upper class men of getting their highly polished boots dirty on the muddy streets. Whether this idea of balance was the limitation of the guest curator or a result of museums' pretexts to impartiality, where showing both sides is considered objective and thus bestows 'equality', I cannot say. What I can say is there is no objectivity or equality in this gendered world nor was there truly in the exhibition. Image after image, story after story attested to the fact that women were much more affected by the fashions of the day, in fact mortally so. A statement of intentional recognition of this would not have

diminished problematic effects on working class men but it would have re-enforced the message the visuals were so actively speaking.

Even within the powerful project that was *In Defiance*, intimations of patriarchal constructions played out. The women who photographed themselves nude or partially clothed and stared defiantly and unmasked at the camera were all young and thin. We cannot know from the exhibition, but we must always query if this was ‘choice’ or the influence, however subliminal, of the judgement, regulation, and censorship of the masculine gaze, the powerful mechanism by which women learn to understand and value their bodies (e.g., [Bates 2018](#); [Pollock 2003](#)).

## 6. Telling a Finer Tale: The Pedagogical Potential of Feminist Exhibitions

Within the faded markings of the canvases people of some imagination and sensibility may read all the signs . . . Or they may there find pictures from their own world of ideas.

([Dinesen 1991](#), p. 102)

For [Pollock \(2003\)](#) all feminist interventions matter because they ‘take part in the profound attempt to shift the very bases of our thought and knowledge systems’ (p. xxvii). As women solicit, show and disseminate stories they can illustrate how we have been systematically shaped by violence, exclusion and silencing and equally, our acts of resistance and imagination, of deconstruction and re-construction. Despite their imperfections, and the spatial, emphasis and temporal distance separating them, as I have illustrated, *In Defiance* and *Fashion Victims* are for me, not only extremely valuable feminist interventions but active practices of feminist community adult education, and I conclude with some of the ways they act as such not highlighted in the stories above.

Feminist community adult education is about providing women with opportunities to continue to speak also, to be heard or listened to and to be seen. Both exhibitions are aesthetic, cultural and intellectual projects that break women’s silence with the deliberate intent of developing new knowledge and ways of seeing women’s lives and stories. Poignantly, creatively and critically they show and tell us what the personal and the political ‘looks’ and ‘feels’ like for women, either within a context of colonialism or fashion. Using a combination of creative rationality, aesthetic perspective and emotionality, they situate us in the realities of women’s vulnerabilities but like all good feminist adult education, these exhibitions are also about empowerment, acts of resistance to women’s depersonalisation and objectivity, in an unflinching challenge to the structures that produce and maintain(ed) forms of violence, social difference, and control. By centralising women’s bodies, the exhibitions provide a canvas upon which to contemplate historical and contemporary contexts or issues, such as ‘consumption’ and capitalism. For me as a learner at the exhibitions, this was a particularly important visualisation of something that is critical to tackle, a visual literacy of consumption and exploitation. Building on this, through images we can engage in a practice of dialogic looking that puts us in conversation with the paradox of women’s vulnerability on one hand, and their power to transform themselves and our knowledge on the other. *In Defiance* firmly positions Indigenous women as non-essentialised complex subjects, whilst *Fashion Victims* highlights the impact of essentialising and homogenising. As feminist adult educators remind us, not all women are ‘the same’ (e.g., [Clover et al. 2015](#)). The exhibitions remind us of this, and it is this ‘seen’ difference that has the potential to build the ally-ship required to move together toward substantive change (activism).

Building on this, as spaces of dialogic presence-of looking and listening-these exhibitions work pedagogically as feminist sites of oppositional looking, their aim to either illuminate or counter the normative of the masculine gaze. As they speak truth to patriarchal power, they respond to [Haraway \(1991\)](#) call for visibility to be reclaimed by feminists as a potent pedagogical tool to develop a gendered inter-sectional consciousness. Visual literacy in *In Defiance* is not solely about the world of colonialism and imperialism it provides the capacity for feminist oppositional looking and seeing, a taking back of the ‘seen’ to construct, mould and shape understandings, feelings, and knowledges of Indigenous women’s (and social) lives identities. A visibility or visual literacy of renewed gender

consciousness vis-à-vis fashion is the background and the backbone of *Fashion Victims*, holding it together, yet allowing for other tendencies, such as explorations of class. Through varying practices of symbolic interactionism these exhibitions are powerful discursive formations that offer multiple possibilities to activate critical thinking, as well as hope in a world that can and will change as long as we remain creatively active and vigilant like Delaronde and Matthews David. For these exhibitions are deeply imaginative pedagogical devices and Mohanty (2012, p. xi) believes this is ‘the most subversive thing’ we can have. To great effect, they use combinations of irony, satire, humour, and metaphor to say one thing and mean another, to speak back, or to make us laugh at ourselves but particularly, at the authors of authority and hegemony. As Hannah Arendt (1970) reminded us, ‘the greatest enemy of authority (. . .) is contempt, and the surest way to undermine it is laughter’ (p. 40).

For Michel-Rolph Trouillot ‘history is the fruit of power . . . The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots’ (in Penn Hilden and Lee 2010, p. 56). C. Wright Mills inscribed history directly to the need to develop the ‘sociological imagination’, defined as a ‘grasp of history and biography (story) and the relations between the two’ (in Lange 2015, p. 492). These relations of history and story are very much visualised in the two exhibitions. *Fashion Victims* is a biography of a time, a story placed firmly in history, that exposes the hidden elements and roots of an industry that quite literally, fashioned women’s deaths. As such, it provides an engulfing visuality of how women’s experiences were shaped by history and creates a platform for debate about the present. How do femininity and gender still play out in and through clothing? How does the fashion industry maintain its ability to construct women’s subjectivities (image and identity) and implicate them into its consumerist ‘method of producing, as well as consuming meaning’ (Arnold 2001, p. 209)? *In Defiance* is situated firmly in women’s biographies and the present, yet the images and narratives persistently illuminate Canada’s historical colonial past. This is the type of space that can encourage the decolonising work of conversation and listening so needed in Canada today (Gordon-Walker 2018). *In Defiance* brings to light and focus not only relations between patriarchy and colonialism, but also white supremacy. As non-Indigenous women taking part in the visual narrative, we are invited to deconstruct our own ‘whiteness’ and reconstruct ourselves as allies (Manicom and Walters 2012). Exhibitions such as these also provide a space to think about historical antecedents and forms of ‘violence’ against women. There are acts that are highly visible, but there is too the invisibility of power and it continues to shape and influence not only industries such as fashion, but women’s bodies, minds and sense of self.

I end with a word on museums and art galleries because they are prominent and prolific sites of exhibition and public education in Canada, as well as other parts of the world. Despite implicit claims to representational completeness, feminist scholars have charged these institutions with too often reinforcing existing patriarchal power structures by concentrating on the stories and arts of men, and we can never under-estimate. Yet, despite this, feminist adult educators and researchers can use these public spaces, as Delaronde and Matthews David have. As noted in the introduction, museums and art galleries are highly trusted legitimisers and mobilisers of identity and reality. When we use these sites for our own research or stories, they lend this same validity to our narratives. And when we show and tell our stories as women we animate the blank page not only for ourselves, but for all who have been left out of the frame.

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